

Cover by Ray Houlihan

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Divide and Conquer

BY
JACK
RITCHIE



They were the type baboons who could be most dangerous, unless you handled things just right.

CHARLEY phoned for me at around eleven and I walked the block and a half to the Green Dollar. The blackjack tables were going all right and the one-arms were taking heavy play, but I thought that something would have to be done for the faro games.

The Green Dollar is the one I started with, but now I've got two more places up the street. When I'm not around, I've got Charley running things.

He was sitting at the desk and looking worried when I opened the office door.

"We got trouble, Tommy," he said.

I lowered myself into a chair and lit up a king-size cigarette. "Don't we always have something on hand to annoy us?" I said.

"This is something different." Charley swiveled his chair to face me. "Maybe we got nothing to worry about and maybe it's big."

I bent the match and flipped it into a ash tray. "Somebody moving in?"

"Looks like it," Charley said. "A big gorilla was here sticking a finger in my chest. He let me know that he and his associates would appreciate a five hundred dollar weekly donation regular every week."

"You should have had him tossed out," I said.

Charley snorted at my suggestion. "I'm a cautious married man with two growing children. I didn't know how many friends he had and I wasn't anxious to find out."

"Anybody we know?"

"From the sound of him, I'd say mid-west. He couldn't be from around here. He thought I owned the joint."

"Think he might really be working alone?"

"Not completely, at any rate. I got the buzz that a runty little character is working the other side of the street. The big boy should get to the Four Deuces pretty soon."

I blew smoke into the air and rested my feet on a hassock. "Did he mention any names?"

"Said I could call him Mugger and that's as far as it went."

Charley took a cigar from the desk humidor and bit off the tip.

"Is anybody kicking in?" I asked.

"The way I get it, these boys just started." Charley lit the cigar. "Everybody's stalling and waiting to see what you're going to do about it."

Charley's eyes met mine. "I'm worried, Tommy," he said. "Gambling's legal in this state and pretty clean. I'd hate to see it spoiled."

The Four Deuces is the biggest and newest of my places. It's part nightclub and I run a floor show to keep the people entertained when they're not gambling.

The food costs me money and I break even on the liquor, but that's the way it always is in a place like mine. It's the big room with the machines, the dice, and the cards that makes it all worth while.

When I walked into my office, I found Juanita Reyes with her sandaled feet on my desk and making herself at home with a Manhattan.

She has a nightclub act with feathers and a lot of confidence and right now she was wearing her costume. It consisted of a little here and not so much there, and she had left her feathers in the dressing room.

She waggled a few fingers at me and smiled. "I knew you would come back," she said. "I'm irresistible."

Juanita took her feet off the polished desk and stretched herself lazily for my benefit. "How do you like my new costume? Just feel the material. It's the best."

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"Why don't you take it off," I said. "It's a stifling hot night."

She fluffed her Mexican black hair. "It must be dreadfully warm for you, too." Juanita had long slender legs and softly curved thighs. She took a deep breath that put considerable strain on her black net brassiere and held the pose.

"Well," I said, grinning. "What I see seems all right."

She was reaching up behind her for the fasteners when the damn buzzer on my desk sounded.

I clicked on the switch and got the voice of Sid, the chief houseman.

"Something big out here is panting to see you. I smell trouble. You want to see him or do I form a posse and have him thrown out?"

"Send him in," I said. "But stick around in case I scream for help." I looked at Juanita. "You can toddle along. If you stay you'll just distract me."

"No," she said. "I want to watch. But impatiently."

The guy who came in was under six feet, but he carried the weight for somebody a good foot taller. You could blame heredity for his face, but you'd have a better case if you considered what a dozen barroom brawls could do.

He lifted a bushy eyebrow when he saw Juanita and she gave him a slow wink and a twitch of the hips. He stopped in his tracks and stared at her.

Standing at my desk, I snapped

my fingers a couple of times. "I'm over here," I said.

He regarded me with acute distaste, but decided he might as well get down to business. "You the guy, Tommy Harrigan what owns dis joint?"

"Dat's me," I said. "And dat's me doll. Don't lay no finger on her."

He scowled at me. "Gettin' immediate to duh point, from now on you pay me five hunnert clams every week. Dis is for me bein' tender to you and not violunt. If you get what I mean."

"I bet he can scratch his knees without bending down," I said. "Juanita, will you see if the cook has any bananas?"

"Personally," Juanita said. "I think he's kind of cute."

Mugger's cauliflower ears were reddening. "Dat wise lip makes it six hunnert a week."

"Is there anything else you might want, Bonzo," I asked. "I'll admit your case stumps me. I'm just used to feeding people."

He came toward me, his big ham fist beginning its swing. "Seven hunnert," he growled. "And dis is your receipt in advance."

I stepped away from the punch and picked up a piece of petrified wood I use for a paperweight. After I slipped under his second swing, I let him have the stone with a wallop to his jaw.

His eyes glazed and he dropped without argument to the rug.

Juanita watched his peaceful breathing. "Do you think that was quite fair?" she asked.

"Sure it was fair," I said indignantly as I hefted the paperweight. "This thing isn't heavier than two pounds. He still had a weight advantage of over forty."

Juanita lit a cigarette. "There's something wrong with your logic, but at the moment it escapes me."

I bent down beside Mugger and went through his pockets. Along with the usual things, he had a .45 automatic and a key to room 424 at the Holder Hotel. His wallet told me that his real name was Quincy Elwood Dowd.

"He's got seventeen dollars," I said, grinning up at Juanita. "He could really show you a good time."

"Hal!" she said, shrugging her shoulders. "Money isn't everything."

I unstrapped Mugger's holster and transferred it to my person.

"Why don't you call the police," Juanita said. "It would be so much simpler."

Sid stuck his head through the doorway just then and I had him get a couple of porters to carry Mugger out into the alley.

When I had on my hat and was ready to leave, Juanita put her hand on my shoulder. "Be careful," she said. "You don't know what you'll be missing if you should get killed now."

"Talk, talk," I said, brushing a strand of hair from her forehead. "I'll bet you're a virgin."

Some embarrassment touched her cheeks. "What a nasty thing to say about a modern girl."

At the Holder Hotel I went directly to Freddie, the desk clerk. "You got a big jerk registered here? Dowd is the name."

"Yeah," Freddie said, eyeing the bulge in my coat. "What for you packing a gun?"

"Was he alone?"

"He's got a single," Freddie said. "But he seemed to be traveling with a dame and a small guy." He spun the register around to show me. "They got three next to each other. 423, 424, and 425."

Dowd had number 424. Number 423 was registered in the name of a Miss Mavis Frawley and 425 to a Jim Beaker.

"The dame draws a whistle out of you," Freddie said. "Everything stacked right, but strictly out of stone. Doll face, but not a smile in a carload."

I drummed my fingers on the desk while I thought. "Freddie," I said. "Can you get me a clear empty medicine bottle? And fill it full of water, will you?"

"Okay," he said. "But I won't sleep tonight if you don't give me a glimmer of what's going on."

The smile I gave him was fond and affectionate. "It's too horrible for your young ears."

The man who opened the door to room 425 was a little squirt, but sharp. He had on a blue pin stripe shirt with button-down collar and

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a nifty blonde hair-line moustache.

I smiled gently as I put the heel of my hand on his nose and shoved hard.

"Hey!" he yelled as he went staggering back on his heels. "What's the big idea?"

I let the front of my sport coat dangle open so he got a look at the gun.

"You a cop, or something?" he asked suspiciously.

"Do I look like a cop, Shorty?"

I gave him a casual swipe with my open palm.

"Hey!" he yelled again. "Cut that out! Just who do you think you are, slappin' a innocent citizen around?"

"I'm practically nobody," I said, regarding him with a quiet smile.

"But I represent the *Syndicate*."

"The *Syndicate*?" he squeaked. "What *Syndicate*?"

I shook my head sadly at his stupidity. "*The Syndicate*," I said. "And I'm from the Enforcement and Retaliation Division." I fixed him with a gimlet eye. "I've been briefed by the big boys that three of you Easterners are thinking of setting up business here."

He cringed when I lifted my hand to scratch my ear. "Just talk," he said nervously. "I kin listen without you getting free with the hands."

Beaker sweated while I studied him long and carefully. "Yes," I said finally. "You're the spitting image of Hoppy Nolan. Same type. Same build."

Beaker licked his lips. "Who's Hoppy Nolan?"

"Hoppy *was* a small time hood from Philly," I said. "He tried to buck the Syndicate about a year ago." I took off my Panama and held it over my heart for a few solemn seconds. "He got run over by an automobile."

Beaker's Adam's apple was traveling up and down.

"It was a tragedy and never should have happened," I said. "But the bottoms of Hoppy's feet were burned pretty bad and he wasn't so nimble."

I gave him a friendly shark grin and teetered a few inches toward him. "But how thoughtless of me," I said. "I forgot to introduce myself." I extended a hand. "The moniker is Matches O'Tool."

His head ducked between his shoulders and he stepped back. "You got me wrong, mister," he said quickly. "I was just passing through this burg. This minute I was packing to catch my train."

I got out a cigarette and after I lit it I allowed the match to burn almost to my fingertips before I blew it out. Beaker watched the small flame with horrified fascination.

"I'll be back in about an hour," I said. "You'll be on the train by then though, won't you?"

"Even," he said emphatically, "if there's no train."

The door of 423 was opened only part way by Mavis Frawley.

Mavis had flaming red hair, green eyes, and the warmth of a bowl of ice cubes.

"Get that damn foot out of the door," she said, "or I'll scream for the cops."

"Go right ahead," I advised her, shoving my way in. "But you look to me like the type that doesn't do much screaming."

She watched me with smouldering eyes. "I charge a thousand bucks a minute," she said. "If you got less than that, see some of the girls down the hall."

"How unkind," I said. "Do I look like that kind of a man?"

Mavis walked over to a small table and put her hand on the phone. "Do I have to get someone to throw you out, or do you get what I'm hinting at?"

I smiled at her amiably. "Before you could get the operator I could toss you out of that window."

"You go to hell!"

"No need for animosity," I said. "I'm prepared to be friendly . . . this time."

Her eyes crackled with hate. "What do you want?"

"I wish it were you, baby," I said. "But this is business." I ground out my cigarette in the ash tray. "The name is Splasher O'Tool," I said. "The boss tells me that you've got a couple of monkeys trying to set up a stand in this town."

Mavis took her hand away from the phone. "The boss?"

"The boss," I said. "This town is sewed up tight and right. We can be downright unfriendly to competition."

"Why don't you try telling that to my 'boys', as you call them?"

"They've been informed," I said. I met and held her eyes. "Beaker got the idea right away, but Dowd is a little damaged."

For the first time, she seemed uncertain, but she said, "You're not scaring me!"

"Of course not," I said.

We studied each other for awhile and she was becoming uneasy.

"Did I ever tell you about Myra Lawson?" I asked.

Mavis said nothing.

"Well," I said, cheerfully, "Myra used to deal blackjack at one of our places. Her take wasn't what it should have been and so we watched her until we found out why."

"She's still around, but she washes dishes for her meals now and doesn't go out in daylight," I said. "The acid, you know."

The little medicine bottle was now in my hand and I held it up. "Looks just like water, doesn't it?"

Her face got white and I gave her time to think.

Finally she asked, "How much time do I have to get out?"

"One hour," I said, as I rose and went leisurely to the door.

"I'll take it," she said bitterly. "But only because I can't operate without the boys."

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Downstairs at the desk, Freddie beckoned to me. "Got a phone call from Sid. He says to call him right away."

In the phone booth I dialed the Four Deuces and asked for Sid.

"That baboon you laid out," Sid said, "left here fifteen minutes ago. On a hunch I had one of the porters tail him."

"And he's waiting for me?"

"Right. He ambled away but circled back. He's in the alley now with a piece of pipe. Should I call the cops?"

"No," I said. "I'm on a winning streak. I think I can handle it."

I walked back to the Four Deuces, but turned into the Bar & Grill that was on the other side of the alley. I went all the way through and into the back yard.

Peeking over the wood fence, I could make out Mugger in the shadows next to the rear exit. Evidently he was hoping that I'd step out for a breath of air.

Taking out the gun and reversing it, I tip-toed up behind him. Mugger had his attention glued to the door and so I had no trouble giving him a swipe behind the ear.

He sighed wearily and caved in, but before he could fall I got under him and slung him over my shoulder. He made a heavy load and I staggered as I carried him into the office and put him on the couch.

I put a glass and a bottle of whiskey next to him and waited. Mugger slept for ten minutes be-

fore painful consciousness returned. He groaned and grunted before opening his blood-shot eyes.

He directed a bleary glance at me. "Was dat you again?" he asked.

"Face it," I said. "I'm too damn tough for you."

Mugger kept his eyes closed. "Don't be so proud. You ain't touched me wid flesh and blood yet. What was it dis time? A gat?"

He forced open an eye to glare at me, but the whiskey bottle interrupted him. Aching every inch of the way, he managed to drag himself up to a sitting position and pour four fingers of the stuff.

Mugger drank deep and wiped his mouth with a sleeve. He stared moodily at the floor. "I feel ruint," he said.

"Don't take it so hard," I said. "Your friends didn't do any better and they're leaving town."

Mugger polished off the rest of the glass and tilted the bottle for a refill. "I knew it wouldn't work, but it's still discouragin'." He winced as he touched his head. "I'm gettin' too old for dis rough stuff."

He tasted the liquor again and examined the office and its furniture. "You get all dis splendor honest?"

"More or less," I said. "Brains had something to do with it."

"Don't rub it in," he said, brooding. "Well," he had a note of sadness in his voice, "I guess I better be leavin'. You ain't got a sawbuck

or two for train fare? I'm near busted."

I considered his dejection for awhile. "The cops interested in you in any way?" I asked.

"Unless you're thinkin' of makin' a complaint, I'm pure as the driven snow right now," he said. "I just got out of the government boarding school and ain't had much time for bein' bad."

"You're getting gray hair, Mugger," I said. "Ever thought of trying legitimate? Like wearing a tux and a carnation and acting like a bouncer. Pays ninety-five a week."

"You serious?" Mugger's eyes rested on my face.

"But no pawing around Juanita," I said. "She's my claim."

"You're takin' the joy outta it," he said. "But I accept. The tear in my eye is hand-lickin' gratitude." He picked up his battered hat.

"Only I need a day or two vacation. My head hurts."

When he left, I removed my coat and tie and stretched out on the couch. I thought, this divide and conquer business sometimes works. I closed my eyes.

I opened them when Juanita came in wearing a smile and an outfit that wasn't much more than the ribbons and bows holding it together.

She snapped the lock on the door and went around dimming the lights. "You look tired," she said.

"Had a hard day at the shop," I said.

She sat down beside me. "I've got a sparkle in my eyes," she said. "What are you thinking of?"

I reached for one of the bows.

She smiled and relaxed against me . . .



City Boy

The policeman in Knoxville, Tennessee, who was assigned to write a report on a missing cow obviously never lived on a farm. He described the cow as yellow, about seven years old, weighing 700 pounds and "with a missing milk spout."

Dead End

Truck drivers complained to police at Port Clinton, Ohio, that something was wrong with the signs on state route 53 directing them through the town. Officers investigated and found that pranksters had changed the signs and the truckers were winding up in a cemetery.

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